DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 268 487 CS 008 379

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TITLE Child Abuse: Helping Children through Bibliotherapy.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Texas State Council of the International Reading Association (13th, Dallas, TX, March 14-16, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; Behavior Development; *Bibliotherapy; *Child Abuse; *Childrens Literature; Elementary Secondary Education; Identification (Psychology); Mental Health; Psychotherapy; Reader Response; *Reading Material Selection; Self Concept; *Sexual Abuse

ABSTRACT

Since children who have been abused much of their lives may be unaware that what is happening is unusual, it may be necessary for teachers to take the initiative in educating young children to recognize that abuse is not normal and to talk with someone if and when they realize they are a victim. This education can take place through the use of carefully selected books or bibliotherapy. Through literature, the child can first identify with the character or situation and by doing so can experience the situation vicariously, letting the child experience a catharsis or emotional release. The result of the identification and catharsis is an insight into the problem. Ideally, such an insight transfers to the child's own special set of circumstances. A teacher can help abused children choose appropriate books for their particular problems. Books can thus be one avenue to help children who are suffering from physical, psychological, and or sexual abuse realize that they are not alone, that someone else has experienced and understands their problem. Bibliotherapy may also alert a child to the fact that he or she is being abused and this does not have to be tolerated. (A four-page bibliography of narrative literature for children and adolescents on child abuse is appended.) (HOD)

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ED268487

Child Abuse: Helping Children Through Bibliotherapy

A Paper Presented at the Texas State
Council of the International Reading
Association Conference

Dallas, Texas

March, 1985

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CS008379

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Child Abuse: Helping Children Through Bibliotherapy

> He bent over the book on his desk, hunching his shoulder blades together so that the partially healed cuts on his back would not be stretched apart, carefully keeping his shirt away from the raw wounds underneath, where even the slightest friction caused a burning pain.
>
> He was seven and a half years old and although he had been in first grade for almost two years, he had not yet learned to read. The open book on his desk, however, was the one thing in school that he loved. On two occasions he had tried to steal it. (Hunt, 1976).

A September 5, 1983 Time article called child abuse "the ultimate betrayal." As educators, are we going to perpetuate this betrayal? Or, are we going to try to behave in an informed, intelligent manner and try to help the children we have said we have made a commitment to? "At stake is America's most precious asset, its human capital." (Time, p. 22).

The number of reported child abuse cases in this country is rising sharply. Between 1976 and 1981 the count of reported cases has doubled from 413,000 to 851,000 respectively. In 1982, the number of reported cases was up 12% from the previous year (Time, 1983). Although these figures are alarming, the increase in reported cases does not indicate that there is necessarily

an actual increase in the evidence of child abuse but perhaps a growing awareness and feeling of responsibility of school personnel, hospital personnel, law enforcement, and social agencies to detect and report instances of suspected or actual child abuse (Time, 1983).

Public Law 93-247 requires educators to report all cases of suspected child abuse (Queen & Queen, 1980). However, unless one knows what child abuse is and what one should be alert to, the educator will be ignorant and hence be impodent in improving the quality of the life of children who are unable to help themselves.

Child abuse has been defined by law. PL 93-247 which was passed by the 93rd Congress states that child abuse is: "Physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child under the age of 18 by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened" (Queen & Queen, 1980, p. 442). There are also three characteristics which must be identified in every case of child abuse: the child must be under the age of 18, must be under the charge of a caretaker, and have suffered nonaccidental physical or psychological injury (Kline, 1977).

The parents or caretakers who abuse often show some common

behavioral characteristics. Often they have tragically low self-esteem, difficulty in seeking pleasure and finding satisfaction in the adult world. They speak of fear of spoiling infants, strong belief in the value of punishment, and claim that the child is misbehaving just to "get" him or her. They may be irrational in regard to the child's failures, refer to the child as "bad", and show serious lack of empathy for the child. Abusing parents may make reference to lack of caring persons to "bail them out" when they can no longer control the child. They fear losing control. When dealing with the child's injuries, they may be unrealistic or cruel (Kline, 1977).

If one suspects or has discovered a case of child abuse what should be done? What are our legal responsibilities? In most states, schools and/or school personnel are among those obligated to report suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. Only 17 percent of the schools have policies accepted by the school board and every school district should adopt policies to inform school personnel of their legal obligations, adopt and issue a policy on reporting, inform personnel of their immunities from civil and criminal liability provided in states with "good faith" reporting, and provide inservice education. (Kline, 1977).

Children are often unaware that they are victims. Especially in the case of sexually abused children, they often may not feel

abused initally. Children have an expectation and the need that adults will protect them and they are unsuspecting of those who may initially seduce them--people they know and trust, including close family members. (Nelson, p. 18) If a child has been beaten since he can remember, nothing in his limited experience may indicate to him that what is happening is unusual. It may be necessary for teachers to take the initiative in educating young children to recognize that what is happening to them is not normal and that they should talk with someone if and when they realize they are a victim. This education can take place through the use of carefully selected books.

Through the use of bibliotherapy, "... use of books to influence total development, a process of interaction between the reader and literature which is used for personality assessment, adjustment, growth, clinical and mental hygiene purposes; a concept that ideas inherent in selected reading materials can have a therapeutic effect upon the mental or physical ills of the reader..." (Good, p. 58), we can begin a classroom dialogue and perhaps give a particular child a feeling that the teacher is both willing and able to help.

Bibliotherapists believe that reading can and often does have a great influence in personality (Olsen, 1975). As Gates (1949) suggested, in a "wholehearted reading activity, the child

does more to understand and contemplate; his emotions are stirred; his abilities and purposes are modified; indeed his innermost being is involved." (p. 4).

Literature develops empathy by helping the reader to relate more fully to this human condition (Sebesta, 1975) perhaps his/her own. According to Shrodes (1955) bibliotherapy produces its effect through indentification, catharsis and insight. The child can first identify with the character or situation in the literature and by doing so can live through the situation vicariously, letting the child experience a catharsis or in other words, an emotional release. The result of the identification and catharsis is an insight into the problem. Hopefully such an insight will transfer to the child's own special set of circumstances (Shrodes, 1955). A teacher can help a child choose an appropriate book for the child's particular problem. The following guidelines for making knowledgeable descisions have been expressed by Huck (1976)

> A book may be considered as suitable for bibliotherapy if it tells an interesting story and yet has the power to help a reader (1) acquire information and knowledge about psychology & physiology of human behavior, (2) learn what it means to "know thyself," (3) find an interest outside himself, (4) relieve conscious problems in a

controlled manner, (5) utilize an opportunity for identification and compensation and (6) illuminate difficulties and acquire insight into his own behavior (p. 264).

Jalongo (1983) offers a similar set of criteria for teachers with regard to making intelligent decisions about selecting appropriate bibliotherapeutic books:

1. Can children identify with the plot, setting, dialogue and characters?

2. Does the book use correct terminology, psychologically sound explanations, and portray events accurately? Is the book professionally endorsed?

3. Are the origins of emotional reactions revealed and inspected?

4. Does the book reflect an appreciation for individual differences?

5. Are good copy strategies modeled for the child?

6. Does the book present crises in an optimistic, surmountable fashion? (p. 32)

Books can be one avenue to make children who are suffering from physical, psychological and or sexual abuse realize that they are not alone, that someone else has experienced and understands their dilemma. Maslow (1968) recommended that

there should be bookstores dedicated to handling and promoting bibliotherapeutic materials--"Shelves stocked with humanistic books, journals and pamphlets." (p. 240) Bibliotherapy in itself is probably not the total answer for those children suffering from abuse. It is, however, a place to start. It allows others to become aware of the problem. It allows abused children the solace of knowing they are not alone. It may alert a child to the fact that he or she is being abused and this does not have to be tolerated. Bibliotherapy is a basis for discussion--a way to open the lines of communication. (See Appendix A)

As teachers, if we are alert to what to look for with regard to abuse, and if we suspect or learn conclusively that a child is being abused, then bibliotherapy may be a valuable tool. We may be able to make a greater contribution to that child than what the curriculum guide stipulates. We may be able to give that child back his life--a life free of that ultimate betrayal--child abuse.

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Appendix A

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